

# Evading the inevitable: Sophocles' tragedy of fate

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Oedipus is one of the best-known tragic heroes, but was this always his destiny? How innovative is Sophocles' treatment of Oedipus, and how much room for manoeuvre does Sophocles give Oedipus?

*'Tragedy is a fortunate art in many ways. For a start, the stories are all well-known to the audiences before anyone opens his mouth. I've only got to mention Oedipus and they know all the rest – his father's Laius, his mother's Jocasta, his daughters, his sons, what he'll suffer, what he's done...'*

So wrote a comic poet, Antiphanes, in the fourth century, by which time Sophocles was dead and buried and his *Oedipus the King* had achieved classic status. Aristotle made the play exemplary for his theorizing about tragedy; Freud treated it as an archetypal case for his psychological analysis. It finds unexpected echoes in popular culture: Lisa Simpson explains the story to her father ('he kills his father and marries his mother.' Homer's response: 'Wow! Who paid for that wedding?').

It takes an effort on our part to recognise that things were not always so obvious. The original audience of Sophocles' drama would not necessarily have been sure what was coming. The myths of tragedy were not fixed in every detail, and even very prominent features could be altered or omitted. Often the dramatists would already know multiple versions from earlier epic and lyric poetry, and they were keen to innovate further. Even the protagonists' names were not sacred: in tragedy Oedipus' wife is Jocasta, but she is called Epicaste in the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* already refers to the incest and to the suicide of Oedipus' wife/mother, but says nothing of children. Indeed, another early epic had Oedipus marry a different wife: the little-known Euryganeia was the mother of his four children. Homer seems to assume that despite the revelation of incest, Oedipus went on ruling at Thebes, though his mother called down curses on him before her death; but what happened to him in the end? The *Iliad* refers to his burial at Thebes, and even in Euripides he is still alive and resident in the city at the

time of the war of the Seven, involving his own grown-up sons. Sophocles, as we shall see, strongly suggests that Oedipus must depart from Thebes into exile, and in the much later play *Oedipus at Colonus* brings him to Athens, to the grove of the Furies where he will end his life in mysterious circumstances. It is a serious possibility that this Athenian ending to the tale is Sophocles' own invention.

## Leaving Aeschylus behind

So, although the audience may have known their mythology, that did not bind Sophocles in a straitjacket. In fact we can be fairly sure that no previous poet had handled the story quite the way he did. He clearly wanted to do things differently from his great predecessor Aeschylus, who had treated the saga of the Theban royal family in one of his trilogies, the three plays being *Laius*, *Oedipus*, *Seven against Thebes*. Of these only the *Seven against Thebes* survives, but the titles make clear that each play dealt with a successive generation. Years must have elapsed between the events of each play: the action becomes more diffuse, the focus shifts from one central character to another. It is typical of Sophocles to avoid the connected trilogy (this format seems to have gone out of fashion after Aeschylus), to aim at a tighter structure, and to focus the audience's concern on a single dominant figure: in other plays Ajax, Antigone, Electra – in this one, Oedipus the King.

Even without having Aeschylus' first two plays it is clear that Sophocles made at least one significant change. This concerns Apollo's warning to Laius before Oedipus' birth. We know that Aeschylus had the Delphic oracle warn Laius three times that he should not father a son, since that son would kill his father. Apollo, in other words, gave Laius every chance to avoid this fate. But Laius went ahead and made love to Jocasta anyway (in some

versions he did so inflamed by drink), and then tried to mend the situation by ineffectually attempting to do away with the child. But Sophocles has not used this version. When Jocasta tells her husband what happened all those years ago, there is nothing conditional about the oracle: it simply told Laius 'that it would be his fate to die at the hands of his son. No placing in time, no suggestion 'better not have children'. The future is settled, whatever evasive measures Laius may try to take. In Aeschylus' version it is possible to blame Laius for his own misfortune: if he had not lapsed, it need not have happened. But in Sophocles we are denied that option. This is not a play of crime and punishment, and Oedipus is not paying for the sins or follies of his father.

## Oracular puzzlement

Delphi plays an important role in Oedipus' career too. Unsure of his origins, he travels to Delphi to ask Apollo about his parents. But the response does not answer that question. Oedipus is only told that he will kill his father and marry his mother. Once again, straight prediction of an inevitable future, no ifs or alternatives. Like Laius, Oedipus determines to ensure this will not come about (by immediately distancing himself as far as possible from those he believes to be his parents); but he will not succeed: indeed, his very decision not to return to Corinth leads him first along the road where he meets and slays Laius, then on to Thebes, just in time to aid the city in time of crisis, answer the Sphinx's riddle, and claim the widowed queen Jocasta as his reward. It seems that it was Sophocles who shaped the Oedipus legend so that it became the ultimate tragedy of fate.

Fate, though, is a difficult concept. There were conflicts and paradoxes already in Homer. Some things are apparently fixed – that Troy is going to fall, that Odysseus will get home in the end; but at times the gods may argue about these outcomes as though they are still up for discussion, and individual gods, including Zeus himself, can consider reversing these decisions. In Sophoclean tragedy we see much less of the gods, and their purposes

are more enigmatic. Oracles give a hint, a glimpse of what is destined, but human beings still hope to exercise free will. Often tragic characters miss the point of prophecies, or seem to recall them imperfectly, or fail to make obvious connections. In real life it would seem incredible that Oedipus and Jocasta would fail to observe the resemblance between the two oracles given to Laius and Oedipus – both referring to parricide. Similarly, when the blind Tiresias voices ominous warnings, Oedipus repeatedly fails to take the point, although the audience easily interprets his not-so-cryptic references to the incestuous marriage. But tragedy does not work by realistic conventions. The characters' failures indicate their mortal limitations, the inability of human beings to understand the divine plan.

In any case, much has *not* been predicted, and Oedipus, like Laius before him, hopes that the inevitable may be avoided, or that it may actually not be inevitable at all. The rules of the Sophoclean universe are not clear to the audience, still less to the characters. It may be that, as in Homer, certain key events are fixed but much else is fluid. Neither Delphic Apollo nor the prophet Tiresias says anything about Jocasta's suicide, which seems to be her own decision, born of despair and shame. Oedipus' self-blinding is more complex: nothing about that in any of the oracles, but Tiresias in his exit speech angrily foretells that 'blind rather than seeing, a beggar no longer rich, the man you seek will journey to a foreign land, finding his way with a stick'. When Oedipus does blind himself, he fulfils this prediction, but it is still his own wilful, passionate act. In answer to the chorus's incredulous questions ('what insanity came upon you, poor wretch?'), he responds

*'Apollo it was, Apollo, my friends, who accomplished these terrible sufferings of mine. But no-one else struck these eyes with his own hands, but my unhappy self.'*

The divine power and the human agent are working together, hardly separable.

### What is the end?

The final scene of the play shows Oedipus blind, but in possession of the truth about himself. The chorus gaze in horror and dismay at his disfigured face, represented presumably by a mask with red-daubed eye sockets. Although he has now been identified as the true heir of Laius and rightful king of Thebes, his dreadful acts, though involuntary, mean that he is defiled and disgraced: he can no longer be king. What is to become of him? Earlier in the play, while still king, Oedipus had issued a proclamation declaring that Laius'

murderer, once found, must be exiled from the land and receive help and hospitality from no one. Now he is sure that this doom must fall upon him, and prepares himself for exile. But the cautious Creon is not convinced: the situation has changed, the revelation is unexpected. He thinks the Delphic oracle must be consulted once more. Oedipus is understandably resistant – they need not go through all that again. But Oedipus is no longer in charge, and the play ends with events in suspense. The man who was king has to go obediently into the palace and wait for his future to be decided.

The effect here is unsettling. Throughout the play the action has moved relentlessly forward towards the climactic revelation. Now the climax is past but the action needs to continue. Moreover, the oracles and Tiresias had previously mapped out the shape of the play; now the human characters find themselves adrift. In one of his passionate outbursts, Oedipus proclaims that

*'this much I know, that neither disease nor any other cause would ever destroy me. For I would not have been saved from death long ago, unless for some dreadful misfortune. But let my doom go wherever it will go.'*

Oedipus has a future, but we do not know what it is, and it seems unlikely that the original audience was any the wiser. Having devised the archetypal tragedy of fate, Sophocles seems to be showing us at the end that much is still uncertain. Both the poet and his hero retain a degree of free will.

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